



EJOURNAL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

VOLUME 10 | ISSUE 3

Civic Engagement Through Theatre: Running a Brechtian Workshop in the Classroom

Margot Morgan
Indiana University Southeast

Author Note

Margot Morgan, Department of Political Science, Indiana University Southeast. This work was funded through an internal grant, the 2016 Summer Faculty Fellowship for Research at Indiana University Southeast. The author would like to thank Jeffrey C. Isaac for his feedback on this article.

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Margot Morgan, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Indiana University Southeast, 4201 Grant Line Rd., New Albany, IN 47150. Phone: (812) 361-8222. Email: mm3@iu.edu

This article presents an innovative active-learning technique for supporting the development of civic education: a theatrical workshop based on the dramaturgy of Bertolt Brecht. The author argues that the Brechtian workshop can develop three skills necessary for effective civic engagement—perspective taking, collaboration, and critical judgment/self-reflection—and that these skills are directly tied to the three civic values of pluralism, community, and civic responsibility. Using qualitative data gathered while teaching this workshop to two distinct student populations (i.e., a self-selecting group of students in a liberal arts environment and a group of students at a commuter campus taking a course required for their major), the author reflects on the workshop’s varying levels of success in developing these skills and offers recommendations for future use of this learning technique.

Keywords: civic engagement, civic education, teaching and learning, active learning, theatre, Bertolt Brecht, drama, civic virtue, political science, social science, education, case study

Consensus has emerged among political science teaching and learning scholars that effective civic education involves more than educating students *about* community; rather, we need to provide students with opportunities to act within their communities as invested stakeholders, preparing them to *do* politics. Active learning techniques—including cooperative learning and simulations—are the most effective means of promoting civic engagement since they engage students with course material in a way lectures do not. By requiring students to create, analyze, problem solve, and reflect, these techniques transform students from passive spectators into actors. Within the discipline of political science, theatrical exercises are uniquely powerful ways to engage students in active learning within the mini public sphere of the classroom.

In this article, I introduce an innovative active learning technique: a theatrical workshop model based on the dramaturgy of Bertolt Brecht. The workshop is designed to develop three specific skills necessary for effective civic engagement, namely perspective taking, collaboration, and critical judgement/self-reflection. This workshop can be used in courses in multiple political science subfields such as political theory, international relations, and comparative politics. It can also be adapted for use in first-year seminar programs and in interdisciplinary courses.

I first discuss the literature on civic engagement and its connection to active learning. I then outline ways that teachers use theatre for civic education, proceeding to explain the Brechtian workshop and then offering an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. Drawing on students' pre- and post-self-assessments and my own observations, I demonstrate how the experience of the workshop cultivates civic skills and how that experience differs according to specific student populations. I conclude with a discussion of the workshop's usefulness as a mode of civic education.

Civic Engagement, Civic Education, and Active Learning

The decline in American civic engagement has led to renewed calls for civic education. The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement made an urgent plea in their 2012 report, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*, calling for visionary leadership that locates education for democracy as a focal point of educational study, reflection, and practice. This moment in history also calls on us to embrace a comprehensive and contemporary vision for civic learning that includes knowledge, skills, values, and the capacity to work with others on civic and societal challenges. (p. 6)

Political science departments are logical places for civic education to take place, and political science scholars of teaching and learning have focused on how to build civic education into the classroom.¹ The American Political Science Association (APSA) has devoted resources to promoting civic education, including a biennial Teaching and Learning Conference with multiple tracks on civic engagement.

¹ There are too many scholars to name here, but a good place to start when looking for political scientists interested in political engagement is Bennion and Laughlin's (2018) review of 51 articles in the *Journal of Political Science Education*. APSA's *Teaching Civic Engagement* books (Matto et al., 2017; McCartney et al., 2013) also include great overviews of the literature.

The term *civic engagement* has been defined in numerous ways. The working definition I employ in this article comes from APSA's *Teaching Civic Engagement* (McCartney et al., 2013), a guide for instructors seeking to identify best practices:

an individual's activities, alone or as part of the group, that focus on developing knowledge about the community and its political system, identifying or seeking solutions to community problems, pursuing goals to benefit the community, and participating in constructive deliberation among community members about the community's political system and community issues, problems, or solutions. (p. 14)

Understood in this way, civic engagement includes not only acts related directly to politics, but all activities concerned with the life of the community in its broadest sense.² This Deweyan understanding expands the scope of civic education beyond a narrow concern with basic political competence (i.e., knowing how to vote; Cogan, 1999) to include not only a host of communication and problem-solving skills, but also civic virtue—the values and habits supporting democratic culture (Boyte, 2017).

Across disciplines and education levels, active learning—defined as activities that require students to engage in the learning process and to reflect on what they have learned—has been found to be incredibly effective pedagogy (Freeman et. al, 2014; Hagood et al., 2018; Prince, 2004). In particular, civic engagement scholars within the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) field have identified active learning methods as the most effective techniques for civic education (Matto et. al, 2017; McCartney, 2013). Active learning encompasses a range of methods, including class discussion, think-pair-share activities, presentations, role-playing games and simulations, problem-based learning activities, and many more. There is strong evidence suggesting that civic engagement programs have a lasting impact on students when integrated into the college experience both inside and outside the classroom (Bok, 2017; Lagemann & Lewis, 2012; Seligsohn & Grove, 2017; Thomas & Brower, 2017). Active learning techniques are ways of implementing civic engagement in both classroom settings and in co-curricular contexts; Model UN programs, voter drives, internships, and student newspapers are all examples of effective active learning co-curricular activities that promote civic engagement (Bennion & Laughlin, 2018).

Theatre as Active Learning

Since the 1990s, a growing number of teaching and learning scholars have written about the value of theatrical exercises, ranging from improvisational activities and theatre games to immersive role-playing and theater as representation (TAR) modalities, as forms of active learning. These scholars come from many disciplines, including medicine (Baerheim & Alraek, 2005; Berk & Trieber, 2009; Hoffman et al., 2008; Love, 2012; Shapiro & Hunt, 2003), education and administration (Meyer, 2004), business, management (Moshavi, 2001), sociology (Fried, 2002), and political science (Dacombe & Morrow, 2017; Gorham, 2000; Moravian College, 2010).

² Thomas Ehrlich (as cited in Rogers, 2017) understood civic engagement in a similar manner when he wrote that civic engagement “means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes” (p. 95).

The potential of theatre as a means of civic education has been directly addressed by a growing body of SOTL scholars (Chilcoat & Ligon, 1998; Love, 2012; Sadler, 2010), including some in political science (Bray & Chappell, 2005). Notably, Sadler (2010) argued that theatrical exercises, specifically those arising from Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, provide students an opportunity to confront situations and institutions that disempower them. In doing so, the exercises allow them to rehearse acting as change agents: "By providing a space to synthesize their multiple identities and roles, students gain the agency to comment on and create change at their universities, in their communities, and on a personal level" (p. 85). The theatrical exercises strengthen students' self-efficacy while providing a rehearsal space for situations and challenges they will encounter outside the classroom.

Bray and Chappell (2005) argued that theatre is uniquely suited to teach what they referred to as "civic attention": listening and communicating with fellow citizens in the public sphere, paying attention to those who are excluded from the conversation, and advocating for their inclusion. For Bray and Chappell, theatre is inherently about critical reflexivity, both for the actors and the audience; that is, both groups serve as critics of the action portrayed on the stage, and as critics, participants use their imaginations to identify useful alternatives. Theatre "has the power, in all its forms to focus our attention, and attention is the key to civic respect" (p. 92).

In line with Sadler (2010) and Bray and Chappell (2005), I argue that theatrical active-learning activities are well suited to the demands of civic education and to the development of civic virtue. Structurally, theatre as an art form depends on social interaction. Theatrical performances connect otherwise isolated individuals through a singular shared experience. Further, theatrical exercises rely on the interaction of the participants through their physical action and/or through their speech. The political theorist Hannah Arendt (1958/1998) once wrote that "the theatre is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere transposed into art. By the same token, it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others" (p. 188). Theatrical exercises offer participants a means of isolating shared problems, scrutinizing them, and experimenting with solutions. Such exercises also allow participants to experience the world from another's viewpoint, developing empathy and promoting introspection.

Utilized in the classroom—a mini public sphere—theatrical exercises provide students with a safe space in which to develop the skills necessary for effective citizenship. For example, perspective taking (i.e., seeing through another's eyes) and self-reflection can be developed through character-based acting exercises that push participants to "act" in ways they would not embrace otherwise, to look at a situation from a view different from their own, and to reflect on the differences between their personal choices and those of their character.³ Collaboration and open-discussion skills can be developed through improvisational work, as students must listen to one another, trust one another, and accept each other's contributions in order for an improv scene to be "successful."

³ Compelling research is being conducted on the power of live-action role-playing games to fundamentally alter a player's perception of themselves and others through perspective taking. Extreme examples are found in Montola (2010) and Montola and Holopainen (2012).

The Brechtian theatrical workshop is an example of the ways theatre can be incorporated into the classroom in order to cultivate civic engagement. The skills it develops—critical judgment, perspective taking, collaboration, and self-reflection—are at the heart of democratic civic education. Further, through the development of these skills, students are able to develop an appreciation of pluralism, community, and civic responsibility as public goods.

Why Brechtian Theatre?

Bertolt Brecht was an innovative playwright who used theatre as a tool of civic education for the working class in Weimar Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. Inspired by Marxist social theory and the artistic elements of the agitprop (agitation propaganda) theatre of his day, Brecht sought to combine pedagogy with performance and to erase the divide between actor and spectator (Morgan, 2013a). He is perhaps best known for codifying what he called “the estrangement effect” (Verfremdungseffekt): drawing attention to something that has been naturalized—for instance, a fact or an event—so that it appears unfamiliar and open to question (Brecht, 1964). While most theatre directors were doing their best to create realistic, naturalist drama, Brecht produced the opposite. Using exposed sets, music that clashed with the mood of the scene, signs that narrated the action, and over-enunciated gestures on the part of his actors, Brecht sought to remind the audience at every turn that what they were watching was not real life. He felt that if he never allowed his audience or his actors to be “taken in” by the world on stage or to feel empathy for the characters portrayed, they would be compelled to rationally evaluate what they were being shown: the choices made by the characters and the actors, the consequences of their decisions, and the world in which the characters lived (Morgan, 2013a). He would teach the audience to think critically by pushing them to judge what they were seeing.⁴ Further, Brecht believed that if his working-class audience could take a distanced, critical view of a play inside the theatre, they would be able to see the world outside the theatre in a critical light as well and would ultimately demand social change (Brecht, 1964, 1965; Morgan, 2013a).

Brecht’s greatest pedagogical achievement was the performance workshops he organized in Weimar Germany. At these workshops, a group of ordinary people—students or workers with no expertise in theatre—performed one of his short *Lehrstücke*, or teaching plays. These plays centered on a moral dilemma that forced the characters to act. They also included juxtaposed principles—community versus individuality, idealism versus realism, and theory versus practice—that required the characters to make difficult choices about which value to privilege. These plays were written to be evaluated by both the actors reading the parts and the observers following along. After each reading, Brecht asked them all to critique the choices made by the characters in the play: Did the hero do the right thing? What else could he have done? The innovation here was having laymen participate in the production as actors, audience members, and critics (Morgan, 2013a). Brecht revised his plays based on the feedback he received during the workshops, thereby indirectly including the participants in the playwriting process as well. Brecht’s workshops often involved the participants swapping roles during the readings so they could gain a different perspective on the action (Kellner, 1980). Arguably, the most effective

⁴ As Brecht (1965) wrote in the *Messingkauf Dialogues*, “[I]n this new theatre I shall be free to transform my audience into kings. Not only into the semblance of kings, but into the real thing. Into statesmen, thinkers, and engineers. What an audience I’ll have! What goes on in the world I shall bring before their judgment seat” (p. 100).

Brechtian workshop is one in which each participant has a chance to read for every character, allowing the actors to subjectively experience the whole situation by way of its parts (Kellner, 1980).

Learning Objectives for the Brechtian Workshop

I am a political theorist who teaches a course of my own design titled “Politics and Theatre.” The course illuminates the importance of theatre in the public sphere. While the students and I devote some attention to state-sponsored theatre designed to control the populace (e.g., Nazi theatre), most of the course focuses on theatre movements of political dissidents, especially those promoting democratic civic virtue and resistance to oppression; George Bernard Shaw, Eugene Ionesco, and Jean-Paul Sartre feature prominently in the syllabus. The Brechtian workshop is the centerpiece of the course—an opportunity for students to experience the power of theatre first hand.

The workshop, which occupies about 3 weeks of the semester, is designed to develop three specific skills necessary for effective civic engagement: perspective taking, collaboration, and critical judgement/self-reflection. When I first designed the course in 2011, I had hoped that, through the development of those skills, students would increase their appreciation for the values underlying democratic civic engagement. Specifically, I hypothesized that the workshop would positively affect students’ perceptions of pluralism, community, and civic responsibility (see Table 1).

Table 1

Civic Skills and Their Corresponding Values

Skill	Value
Perspective taking	Pluralism
Collaboration	Community
Critical judgement/self-reflection	Civic responsibility

Social perspective taking is the ability to view and understand a situation from another’s point of view (Johnson, 2015; Weinstein, 2004). Perspective taking is understood to be necessary for the appreciation of diversity, for the development of civic identity, and for productive debate and discussion (Johnson, 2015), all of which are essential for effective civic engagement. Pluralism—its corollary value—involves not only respect for the views of others, but also, more broadly, the valuation of debate and discussion as public goods. I hypothesized that the more students were able to see a situation from alternative points of view, the more they would value pluralism as a matter of principle. Similarly, I also hypothesized that the more experience students had with collaboration—a key component of civic life—the more they would value those with whom they were working as well as the notion of community in general.

A primary obligation of citizens is to make judgments about issues that affect their community, distinguishing among candidates, thinking through the causes of community problems, and working out potential solutions. As Arendt (1973/2003) wrote, “The faculty of

judgment,” understood as active reflection, is “the most political of man’s mental abilities” (p. 188). The development of this kind of civic judgment is essential for effective citizenship. Without it, members of democratic societies risk becoming submissive subjects of bureaucratic dictates or angry tribalists treating others as dangers if not enemies (Arendt, 1971/2003; Berger, 2009). The Brechtian workshop is designed to help students use perspective taking and collaborative dialogue to develop the democratic skill of critical judgment. On this score, I hypothesized that the more students engaged in self-reflection and reasoned judgement, the more they would recognize the exercise of such judgment as a responsibility they have to their community. Like Brecht, I sought to use the workshop as a microcosm of the world outside it: Though the students’ “community” was limited to fellow workshop participants, I hoped they would make the connection between their experience in the course and their lives outside the classroom.

The Workshop Process

I begin the workshop by assigning Brecht’s most famous teaching play, *The Decision* (*Die Massnahme*).⁵ The plot centers on a group of communist Agitators sent to China to covertly instill class-consciousness in the peasantry and to urge them to engage in revolution. A Young Comrade is sent with them to help them do this. At every turn, however, he makes decisions that go against the orders the group was given and that put the group—and the revolution—in danger. The moral dilemma of the play hinges on the question of what the agitators should do about their comrade. He openly says he will not cease his dissenting behavior, so they are left with a choice: They can kill him, sacrificing his life for the revolution that will save tens of thousands of people, or they can let him live, forfeit the revolution, and most likely die at the hands of the Chinese authorities. Their decision, which they agonize over both before and after the fact, is to kill their comrade. The action of the play takes place in the context of a trial: The four Agitators are explaining to the Control Chorus (i.e., the communist leadership) why they killed the Young Comrade. The Control Chorus has called them to account for their actions and, at the end of the play, decides in their favor.

My students’ first assignment is to read the play as homework and to write a short reflection paper on the Agitators’ decision to murder the Young Comrade. I ask them if the Agitators did “the right thing,” if the Young Comrade deserved to die, if there was an alternative plan of action the group could have taken. This paper serves as a kind of pretest, allowing me to assess the level of complexity of each student’s judgment of the case. I am not interested in whose side they take (i.e., the Agitators’ or the Young Comrade’s); rather, I am interested in assessing the kinds of reasons they provide for their judgment. Do they weigh both sides or discern other “sides”? Do they see the dilemma as simple or as complicated?

After the reflection papers are turned in, the actual workshop commences. For the next week or two of class meetings, we engage in one long, continuous reading of the play. After each scene, we pause to discuss the play’s action. We discuss the moral dilemma the Agitators face and the merits of their decision to kill their comrade. Some questions I ask include: What does this scene reveal about the mission the group is on or about their understanding of communism?

⁵ The title of the play is often translated as *The Measures Taken*.

Do you empathize with the Young Comrade here, or do his actions frustrate you? How does the action complicate your assessment of the situation?

The students trade parts after each scene, moving through the roles of the Control Chorus, the Agitators, and the Young Comrade until they end up with the role with which they began. Playing a character allows an actor to experience a scene through the eyes—or voice—of another. By having each student play each role, I complicate that experience. By the end, each student has seen the whole from three distinct points of view: the victim's, the killers', and the judge's. This exercise pushes students to engage in perspective taking, giving the students the experience of standing in another's shoes.

As we progress from scene to scene, I encourage the students to experiment with the way they read the lines. Though we begin with the Agitators speaking in unison, the students are free to change the presentation so that the Agitators take turns reading single sentences or whole speeches. Each change in presentation alters the mood of the piece and may affect students' assessment of the power dynamics involved in the relationships among the characters, as well as whether the Agitators acted correctly. I also encourage students to experiment with stage blocking and movement, and to think about the costumes, props, music, and other details they would use if they were to perform the play for an audience. (While not required, I give students the option of performing the play for an audience if they think it would be worthwhile.)

After the workshop ends, we have a debriefing session in which we return to the question of the Agitators' decision. I also ask students to reflect on the workshop experience—of reading the play aloud, of making choices regarding staging and tone, and of playing each part. In this session, I push students to engage in metacognition, to think about their own thinking and to judge their own judgements. Finally, I assign students another short paper, much like the first, asking them to reflect upon the Agitators' decision and to explain what they think they would have done in the same situation. This is the posttest of the workshop. In their final papers, I assess, through students' self-evaluations, whether the workshop was successful as a civic-education tool. Did the students broaden their views? Did their judgments become more complicated? Did playing the roles of the different characters affect their evaluation of the situation? Further, did the workshop alter their evaluation of the values I sought to cultivate: pluralism, community, and civic responsibility?

Workshop Results⁶

As part of my Politics and Theatre course, I have held the workshop three times: initially at the Collins Living and Learning Center at Indiana University (IU) Bloomington and twice later at IU Southeast, where I am currently an assistant professor. The student bodies at these two institutions are quite different. I hypothesize that these differences contributed greatly to the variance in workshop outcomes. The results presented here speak to which student populations would be best served by such a pedagogical intervention. In the following sections, I discuss the results of the workshop held at the Collins Living and Learning Center and then proceed to discuss how the workshop unfolded at IU Southeast.

⁶ This research was exempted by the Indiana University Southeast's Institutional Review Board.

Collins Living and Learning Center⁷

The Collins Living and Learning Center (hereafter, Collins) is a residential unit on the IU Bloomington campus where self-selecting students choose to live and take courses together. Collins is a tight-knit community in which administrators, students, and faculty work closely together; it has the atmosphere of a small liberal arts college. Nearly all of the students at Collins come straight from high school, and all have committed to the liberal arts model of education, according to which the exploration of ideas is primary. The vast majority of Collins students have the luxury of not having to work full-time jobs while attending college, allowing them to focus exclusively on their studies and their social lives.

All the students in my 2011 Politics and Theatre seminar were traditional students, having enrolled in college right after high school, and with the exception of one sophomore, all were first-year students. Many of these students had had some experience with theatrical or vocal performance prior to taking the course. They were a self-selecting group, choosing my seminar from a list of options based on their interest in the subject matter.

For these students, the Brechtian theatrical workshop was more successful than I had hoped. Timid at first, the students in my class eventually warmed up to the assignment, developed a sense of camaraderie, and ultimately embraced the project with open minds, bringing creative staging options to the table. They even decided to perform *The Decision* for their peers, which they did on the Collins quad on the last day of the semester. In their reflection papers on the workshop (i.e., their posttests), they noted how much they enjoyed the experience, how it had helped them make friends, and how it had aided their personal growth as students and as human beings.

Moreover, their reflection papers indicated measurable growth in the three focal areas of civic engagement: perspective taking, cooperative engagement/collaboration, and critical judgement/self-reflection. I hypothesized that having the students play each role would expand their perspective on the decision made by the Agitators in a meaningful way, that is, that they would be able to respect conflicting points of view on the issue. Indeed, eight of the 11 students discussed this explicitly. One student wrote,

I found that when I initially read the play by myself, I disliked the Agitators and sided more with the Young Comrade's decisions, but the first time I played an agitator I started to question why the young comrade was being so foolish and reckless.

Further, one student expressed an appreciation for perspective taking as a public good, revealing an appreciation for the principle of pluralism:

I now realize it is essential for growth (as an actor and a human being) to assess situations from all points of view in order to gain a better understand [*sic*] of the situations we find ourselves in. This applies beyond the walls of the theatre, as many of these lessons apply to everyday life. As a member of the Control Chorus, I learned the importance of observation. As the Young Comrade, I learned the value of selflessness and allegiance to things you find important. And as an Agitator, I learned the benefits of adaptability and find the courage to speak out. The play taught me how even though it is

⁷ I previously presented these findings at the 2013 APSA Teaching and Learning Conference (Morgan, 2013b).

hard to put yourself in other people's shoes, doing so can open your eyes to an understand [*sic*] of why people do things—even in situations where their behavior seems immoral or wrong.

This student's comments highlight the workshop's success in developing the skill of perspective taking as well as instilling a positive view of pluralism. The student not only was able to see a situation from multiple points of view, but also was pushed to reflect on that experience, becoming aware of herself as capable of perspective taking and cognizant of its power to broaden her understanding of situations she thought she had understood.

Effective civic engagement also requires both the ability and the inclination to work with others to solve problems and create new alternatives. The workshop succeeded in each of these regards. Several students wrote about how much the workshop helped them get over their fear of speaking up in class and/or of performing in front of others. The workshop helped these students develop self-efficacy around working with others and in relation to their ability to contribute meaningfully to a group project. As one student wrote,

I was very insecure about my lack of knowledge [of theatre], so I shut everyone out and kept to myself. When we were all put under the pressure of actually performing one of the plays, I came to realize that I was not as far behind as I had originally thought. I don't think I give myself enough credit for how much I've learned in the past few years. Everyone was dealing with various insecurities the entire time, and working through them together helped us bond.

Likewise, another student reflected,

Working through the play in front of people I barely knew but knew that I would see on a near-daily basis was really discomfoting. After I eventually got over both myself and whatever it was that made me uncomfortable, I came to find the experience quite enjoyable and began to look forward to it ... [The workshop] got me out of my comfort zone for which I've come to be increasingly grateful.

Several students spoke of the confidence they gained working with others in a collaborative environment. The workshop was also successful in providing a positive experience of collaboration, a necessary element of civic engagement. Many students wrote about how the workshop connected them to their peers, as the following students' remarks indicate:

I was surprised as to how fast we were all able to cooperate together as a team.

The workshop had the class thoroughly engaged and gave us the power of deciding how every aspect of the play should be worked out. Thus, it enabled us to stamp the play with our own mark of identification and it our very own.... When the public performance was finished, I felt much closer to all my classmates, for I felt as if we accomplished something as a team.

Overall, seven of the 11 students spoke of the group's ability to collaborate well. Four of the 11 commented on the value of community as a good in and of itself, as the following comments reflect:

Working together to reach a common goal brings people out of their shell and creates a close bond that extends outside of the context of the goal. Something similar happened with our class as we went through the workshop.

We combined our thoughts and feelings in a giant melting pot, and we were able to create something that I found beautiful, even without all of the extra special effects, and lights, or even a stage. To me, that is the greatest thing I could have received—a completely unplanned and wonderful expression of the human condition... All humans need to have the ability to communicate and learn from one another, and you allowed us to do just that.

These students were excited not only for the bond they felt with their classmates, but also for how well the public performance turned out. Through collaboration, they saw that they were able to create something none of them could have made on their own. The workshop expanded their view of the possible in terms of both what theatre can be and what cooperation can accomplish.

Critical judgment—the ability to make sophisticated, rational judgments and to reflect on one’s process of judgement—is the final skill the workshop helped to develop. In their pre-workshop papers, many students made simplistic judgements of the moral dilemma at the center of the play. Almost all sided with the Young Comrade against the Agitators, on the grounds that he was “in the right” because he was pursuing individual liberty against communist conformism. However, in their post-workshop perspective papers, though many maintained their allegiance to the Young Comrade, their reasoning had become more complex, taking into account the Agitators’ arguments in a serious way and siding with the Young Comrade in spite of his flaws. Others changed their allegiance to the Agitators—again, recognizing the complexity of the situation. Their reflections revealed that the workshop had not only enlarged their perspective of the Agitators’ decision, but also led them to qualify their initial assessment of that decision.

Just as telling as their revised evaluations of the situation in the play were their reflections on their own judgments, on Brecht’s judgement, and on the process of judgment itself. One student’s final reflection paper was riddled with questions, including, “Why would Brecht do this here?,” “What would we have done in the [Young Comrade’s] place?,” and “What makes me different from the Young Comrade?” Another student shared an insight about herself as a result of her participation in the workshop:

I found that when I would play a different character I would automatically side with them and turn my decisions into theirs. It took about 3 classes before I made this realization and started to question the character I was playing. I believe that this instance showed me something about myself. I tend to be a person who just goes with the flow. I used to think that that was a good quality to have, but now I can see that sometimes one should be careful not to loose [*sic*] themselves in someone else’s ideas.

For this student, practicing the skill of perspective taking in the context of the workshop led to deep self-reflection. This kind of reflection, or reflexivity, is essential for effective civic responsibility. Many students demonstrated the ability to make deliberate, reasoned judgements after weighing both sides of the argument; several others engaged in self-reflection. Overall, nine of the 11 students exercised some form of critical judgment.

In summary, the Brechtian workshop conducted at Collins succeeded in developing perspective taking, collaboration, and critical judgment. The students embraced the workshop's creative aspects (designing and producing their own production) and thought deeply about the moral dilemma at the heart of the story. Based on my experience at Collins, I believe the Brechtian workshop holds great potential as a tool for the civic education of young, self-selecting students committed to the liberal arts model of education.

Indiana University Southeast

When I taught a revised version of my Politics and Theatre course at IU Southeast in spring 2014 and spring 2016, the workshop went much differently than it had at Collins. I consider these workshops to have been mitigated successes in that student participants developed critical judgement and perspective-taking skills, but had mixed and, in some cases, negative experiences of collaboration, as I describe in this section.

IU Southeast is a commuter campus with a large population of nontraditional students and/or international students. Many are raising families and/or returning to school after years in the workforce or the military. Most students work at least part-time while attending school, and many work full-time. These students bring with them diverse life experiences and a practical view of education as a tool they need to succeed in the world outside the classroom. They are deeply concerned with the real-world relevance of the courses they take and the projects they are assigned, and many are skeptical of ideas that, to them, seem odd or unrealistic.

The 15 students who enrolled in my spring 2014 Politics and Theatre course were a mix of traditional and nontraditional students. While one or two were excited about the content of the course, the vast majority were taking it to fulfil a political theory requirement for the political science major. Since I am the only political theorist in my department, my course was the only upper-level theory course offered that semester. I was also a new professor, in my second semester at IU Southeast, so only a few of the students knew what to expect from my courses. The rest of the students were expecting a traditionally designed (i.e., lecture-based) course.

There was also an odd dynamic among the students in the spring 2014 course. The workshop fell in the middle of the semester, and even before it began, tension developed between two groups of students: the more traditional students interested in a liberal arts education and the nontraditional students who were older, generally more conservative politically, and focused on the practicality of their education. The workshop exacerbated this tension. A clear division emerged right away, as many of the younger students originally voiced their sympathy for the Young Comrade just as the older students argued that the Agitators had done the right thing.

All these factors—the larger number of students in the course, students' practical reasons for taking the course, their expectations for the course, and the tension between the two “factions,” as one student described them—contributed to a different set of results relative to the 2011 Collins workshop.

Regarding perspective taking, none of the students in the 2014 workshop echoed the Collins students' reflections on the power of acting the different parts. Instead, many wrote that *listening* to the different ways a part was read helped expand their appreciation of a character and of the play. One student's comments exemplify this trend:

After we got through a few people reading for the Young Comrade, I realized that we have no idea how he was actually supposed to sound. We had people with small voices playing him and he sounded helpless, then we had people with large voices playing him and he sounded completely different. Depending on the inflection we gave and how we each interpreted the text, the way that his messages came across changed from person to person. This was interesting for me, and helped me realize that I could've been looking at the Young Comrade all wrong.

As she and her peers noted, the way the Young Comrade sounded in their heads when they read the play alone was only one way he could have sounded, a realization that caused them to reconsider their judgment of him. Interestingly, however, no student commented on their experience acting the part of the Young Comrade. Overall, nine of the 13 discussed their experience of perspective taking, while two of the nine spoke of the importance of pluralism.

In terms of developing students' inclination and ability to collaborate, the workshop was a failure. Not only did none of the students develop self-efficacy, but their inclination toward collaboration with those different from themselves may actually have been harmed by the workshop. The tension between the two student factions increased throughout the workshop, leading to moments of barely repressed hostility on the part of a few students. One student, who had missed the first half of the workshop due to illness, arrived halfway through and made this observation:

I immediately saw that there were factions of people within the class with very different opinions of the play. There were a few who felt that the agitators were completely in the wrong for killing the comrade, and I can safely assume that these were the more "liberal" classmates. There were others who were wholeheartedly in agreement with the killing of the young comrade, namely the more "conservative" classmates. Then there were others who were merely just going through the hoops of the workshop to get the grade.

This breakdown of those who supported the Young Comrade and those who supported the Agitators was not as clean as this student assumed, as there were a few liberals who backed the Agitators in the beginning. It is noteworthy that this student jumped to the conclusion he did, and I think this inference was not his alone. Students made assumptions about one another and often wrote each other off because of these assumptions, rather than engage in good-faith discussion.

As a result of the divisive nature of the ongoing conversation, "the factions in class were just talking past each other," as one student put it, and very little discussion took place about the creative aspects of the workshop; that is, very little experimentation went on with regard to line readings, blocking, or other artistic elements of production. When I brought up the possibility of a public reading or performance, the idea was immediately shot down. Only four of the 13 students spoke of the collaborative element of the workshop in a positive way; four others spoke of it in a decidedly negative way.

The most effective civic-education element of the workshop was the development of critical judgment. Despite the negative atmosphere of much of the discussion (or perhaps because of it), many students altered their judgments of the Agitators' decision to kill the Young Comrade. This occurred on both sides, with most students' ultimate judgment being that neither side had acted justly. Almost everyone's judgments became complicated, like those of the Collins students, and a few students engaged in reflection on their own process of judgment and

on how they arrived at those judgements. Ultimately, eleven of the 13 students demonstrated the ability to engage in critical judgment.

When I held the workshop again in 2016, the factional dynamic of the previous cohort did not emerge. A small group of eight, comprising mostly introverted and mostly nontraditional students, took the workshop seriously and did their best to contribute. Similar to the 2014 group, this cohort did not find any great benefit to acting out the parts but gained from listening to the parts being read. Three students went so far as to suggest that in the future, having the class listen to a recorded reading would be more helpful than making them participate in the workshop. In fact, the performative perspective-taking aspect of the exercise was deemed useful by only one student, partly, I believe, because many students indicated their inability to read aloud without focus intensely on getting the words right. That said, six of the seven wrote in their reflection papers about their ability to see the events of the play from multiple perspectives, and one spoke of the value of pluralism as a public good.

Just as they felt uncomfortable with the acting aspect of the workshop, the group seemed uninterested and/or “out of their element” when asked to experiment with movement and intonation, leaving the creative elements of the workshop largely unexplored. The greatest success here, as with the 2014 group, related to their discussion of the moral dilemma at the heart of the play. All but two students sided with the Agitators in the beginning; yet, by the end, one Agitator-supporter had switched his allegiance to the Young Comrade, while the rest had qualified their judgments based on class discussion. This group took the issue of critical judgment seriously, pondering the ethical principles that could support or work against the Agitators’ decision. Further, the group always engaged in respectful dialogue. One student was pleased that the workshop “helped [her] to connect with the class” by creating a friendly environment where she felt comfortable expressing her opinions. Many students reflected that listening to their colleagues’ opinions helped them see the issues in ways they never would have otherwise and that it was a particular colleague’s remarks that made them rethink their initial judgments. I consider these remarks indications that collaboration did take place, though not in the artistic way I had envisioned. This group worked together to think through the moral dilemma at hand and succeeded in maintaining an open and respectful discussion over several weeks. Four of the seven students wrote positively about their experience collaborating with their peers, while only one found the collaborative aspect of the workshop problematic.

Additionally, five of the seven students reflected on their own process of critical judgment. One wrote that listening to other students—especially younger ones—“made me realize that as I have gotten older I have gotten more cynical in how I view the world and made me find that [youthful perspective] again in myself.” Others reflected on the ways judgments are arrived at in general, with several noting the importance of life experience in determining how one will see the world. One student noted that “what perspective you start from will define what you get out of the play,” while another, the only vocal supporter of the Young Comrade, came to the following conclusion:

In the end I realized, we made each of our decisions based on our personal experiences in life and we justified our decisions based on how we thought we might react or the options we would consider. It was scary to think I could literally be thrown into the plot of this play and be sitting next to my killers.

For her, the ultimate moral lesson of the play was that “people can be pressured into doing terrible things,” even good, rational people like her classmates.

Conclusion: Connecting Skills and Values in Civic Engagement

It is always tempting to focus on one’s successes, yet we can learn as much from our failures. In their review of 51 articles on civic education, Bennion and Laughlin (2018) argued for the importance of “negative” results: “We need to understand why” some tools of civic education work and others do not; further, “if specific pedagogical tools demonstrate positive learning outcomes in some areas, but not in others, it is important to understand why and adjust our tools and expectations accordingly” (p. 307). Regarding my Brechtian workshop, I have positive and negative results to report (see Table 2).

Table 2

Post-Workshop Assessment Results: Number of Students Who Demonstrated Skills/Values

Skill/Value	2011 (n = 11)	2014 (n = 13*)	2016 (n = 7**)
Skill: Perspective taking	8	9	6
Value: Pluralism	1	2	1
Skill: Collaboration	7	4+ / 4-	4+ / 1-
Value: Community	4	0	1

Note.

* Two students did not turn in a post-workshop paper.

** One student did not turn in a post-workshop paper.

While it is not possible to extrapolate based on three trials, I hypothesize that the variance in success relates to characteristics of each student population and their expectations around classroom instruction. I believe these varying conditions and outcomes speak to broader issues that effective civic education can and must address.

In my experience, the Brechtian workshop was most effective as an exercise in civic engagement when used with a traditional student population on a residential campus, in a course drawing students due to their interest in the subject matter and willingness to explore new learning techniques. The opportunity cost of the workshop—roughly 3 weeks of class time for seminar-sized groups—is well worth the result. In these contexts, self-selecting students can collaborate to create their own production, experiencing the play from multiple vantage points and reflecting on their experiences. The workshop offers students the experience of engaging in a micro-political world, with their choices, dialogues, and judgments determining the outcomes of the project.

When used with nontraditional students on a commuter campus in a course required for the major, the workshop was less effective in encouraging collaboration. That said, the workshop can still develop the skills of critical judgment and self-reflection. The exercise may be met with resistance by students who are reticent about moving out of their comfort zones; at worst, it can reinforce previous judgements, feed into stereotypes about those who think differently, and decrease the desire to work together with others different from oneself. Given the current adversarial political climate in the United States, teachers using the workshop in their classrooms may well encounter the emergence of political divides as I did. For this workshop to succeed as a civic engagement intervention in such a context, workshop facilitators should be prepared to intervene—to initiate meta-conversations about the tension in the room, the resistance to the activity, and the assumptions students make about one another. An intervention can redirect students' energies toward the workshop itself, leading to a better outcome. I recommend including some type of production at the end of the workshop. A required production, even if performed for a small group of invited guests, would require students to put their differences aside and work together, directing their energies towards collaboration.

Regardless of the student population, I believe that including an extra day or two of debriefing would greatly enhance the workshop's long-term impact on students.⁸ In future iterations of the workshop, I plan to use debriefing days to draw direct connections between the skills students utilized in the workshop and the values that are at the heart of civic engagement. As evidenced in my results, a few students made the connection between perspective taking and pluralism on their own; further, several addressed the relationship between collaboration and their relationship with their fellow students. At the same time, I hypothesize that with a proper debriefing session focused on civic engagement, students could have a deeper conversation about the workshop and the ways it cultivates (or fails to cultivate) pluralism, community, and civic responsibility, as well as why those public goods matter.

I continue to use theatre in my teaching in order to offer students the opportunity to experience politics. In addition to the Brechtian workshop, I include *Reacting to the Past* role-playing games and simulations in my courses. Though not touted as theatre exercises, these learning tools have much in common with improvisational theatre, affording students the experience of acting in a microcosmic political world where their actions have consequences and relationships with others carry weight. Based on both my experience and the research of others,⁹ I have come to appreciate that the most important aspect of such active learning exercise is the debrief. Establishing connections between skills and values in a clear, explicit manner could be central to making a lasting impression on students about the importance of civic engagement and their place in the community outside the classroom.

⁸ My workshops included only one day of debriefing.

⁹ As Wedig (2010) pointed out, "The debriefing process is in many ways the key to the entire simulation process, as it is the piece that connects the student-driven, active-learning component back to the instructor-designed course content and learning objectives" (p. 553).

References

- Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1958)
- Arendt, H. (2003). *Responsibility and judgment* (J. Kohn, Ed). Schocken. (Original work published 1971)
- Baerheim, A., & Alraek, T. J. (2005). Utilizing theatrical tools in consultation training: A way to facilitate students' reflection on action? *Medical Teacher*, 27(7), 652–654. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01421590500046437>
- Bennion, E. A., & Laughlin, X. E. (2018). Best practices in civic education: Lessons from the *Journal of Political Science Education*. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 14(3), 287–330. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2017.1399798>
- Berger, B. (2009). Political theory, political science, and the end of civic engagement. *Perspectives on Politics*, 7(2), 335–350. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759270909080X>
- Berk, R. A., & Trieber, R. H. (2009). Whose classroom is it, anyway? Improvisation as a teaching tool. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 20(3), 29–60. http://www.ronberk.com/articles/2009_improv.pdf
- Bok, D. (2017, October 6). The crisis of civic education. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 64(6).
- Boyte, H. C. (2017). John Dewey and citizen politics: How democracy can survive artificial intelligence and the credo of efficiency. *Education and Culture*, 33(2), 13–47. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/680656>
- Bray, B. L., & Chappell, L. W. (2005). Civic theater for civic education. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 1(1), 83–108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15512160590907630>
- Brecht, B. (1997). *The decision* (J. Willett, Trans.). In J. Willett & R. Manheim (Eds.), *Collected plays, volume 3ii: The Mother and Six Lehrstücke* (pp. 61–91). Methuen & Co. (Original work published 1955)
- Brecht, B. (1964). *On theatre* (J. Willett, Ed.& Trans.). Hill and Wang.
- Brecht, B. (1965). *The Messingkauf dialogues* (J. Willett, Trans.). Methuen & Co.
- Chilcoat, G. W., & Ligon, J. A. (1998). Theater as an emancipatory tool: Classroom drama in the Mississippi Freedom Schools. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 30(5), 515–543. <https://doi.org/10.1080/002202798183431>
- Cogan, J. J. (1999). Civic education in the United States: A brief history. *International Journal of Social Education*, 14(1), 52–64.
- Dacombe, R., & Morrow, E. A. (2017). Developing immersive simulations: The potential of theater in teaching and learning in political studies. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 50(1), 209–213. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096516002456>
- Freeman, S., Eddy, S. L., McDonough, M., Smith, M. K., Okoroafor, N., Jordt, H., & Wenderoth, M. P. (2014). Active learning increases student performance in science, engineering, and mathematics. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Scientists*, 111(23), 8410–8415. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1319030111>

- Fried, M. (2002). Using theater as a tool to teach gender theory. In A. Blackstone & B. Lucal (Eds.), *The sociology of gender: Syllabi & other instructional materials* (5th ed.; pp. 276–278). American Sociological Association.
- Gorham, E. B. (2000). *The theater of politics: Hannah Arendt, political science, and higher education*. Lexington Books.
- Hagood, T. C., Watson, C. E., & Williams, B. M. (2018). Reacting to the past: An introduction to its scholarly foundation. In C. E. Watson & T. C. Hagood (Eds.), *Playing to learn with reacting to the past: Research on high impact, active learning practices* (pp. 1–16). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hoffman, A., Utley, B., & Ciccarone, D. (2008). Improving medical student communication skills through improvisational theater. *Medical Education*, 42(5), 537–538. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1111%2Fj.1365-2923.2008.03077.x>
- Johnson, M. (2015). Developing college students' civic identity: The role of social perspective taking and sociocultural issues discussions. *Journal of College Student Development*, 56(7), 687–704. <http://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2015.0074>
- Kellner, D. (1980). Brecht's Marxist aesthetic: The Korsch connection. In B. N. Weber & H. Heinen (Eds.), *Bertolt Brecht: Political theory and literary practice* (pp. 29–42). University of Georgia Press.
- Lagemann, E. C., & Lewis, H. (2012). Renewing civic education: Time to restore American higher education's lost mission. *Harvard Magazine*, March-April, 42–45. <https://harvardmagazine.com/sites/default/files/pdf/2012/03-pdfs/0312-42.pdf>
- Love, K. I. (2012). Using theater of the oppressed in nursing education: Rehearsing to be change agents. *Journal for Learning through the Arts*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.21977/D9812650>
- Matto, E. C., McCartney, A. R. M., Bennion, E. A., & Simpson, D. (Eds.). (2017). *Teaching civic engagement across the disciplines*. American Political Science Association.
- McCartney, A. R. M. (2013). Teaching civic engagement: Debates, definitions, benefits, and challenges. In A. R. M. McCartney, E. A. Bennion, & D. Simpson (Eds.), *Teaching civic engagement: From student to active citizen* (pp. 9–20). American Political Science Association.
- Meyer, M. J. (2004). Theater as representation (tar) in the teaching of teacher and administrator preparation programs. *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Teaching*, 8(6). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ984547.pdf>
- Montola, M. (2010). The positive negative experience in extreme role playing. In *Proceedings of Nordic DiGRA 2010*. <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/10343.56524.pdf>
- Montola, M., & Holopainen, J. (2012). First person audience and the art of painful role-playing. In E. Torner & W. J. White (Eds.), *Immersive gameplay: essays on immersive media and role-playing*. McFarland & Co.
- Moravian College. (2010). Performing political theory. *Moravian College Magazine*, (Fall), 5. <https://www.moravian.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/PerformingPoliticalTheory.pdf>

- Morgan, M. (2013a). *Politics and theatre in twentieth-century Europe: Imagination and resistance*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Morgan, M. (2013b, February). Learning politics through theatre: What the performance workshop can offer political science pedagogy. Paper presented at the 2013 APSA Teaching and Learning Conference, Long Beach, CA.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2207082>
- Moshavi, D. (2001). Yes and ... : Introducing improvisational theatre techniques to the management classroom. *Journal of Management Education*, 25(4), 437–449.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/105256290102500408>
- National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. (2012). *A crucible moment: College learning and democracy's future*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Prince, M. (2004). Does active learning work? A review of the research. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93(3), 223–231. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2168-9830.2004.tb00809.x>
- Rogers, M. T. (2017). The history of civic education in political science: The story of a discipline's failure to lead. In E. C. Matto, A. R. M. McCartney, E. A. Bennion, & D. Simpson (Eds.), *Teaching civic engagement across the disciplines* (pp. 73-96). American Political Science Association.
- Sadler, K. (2010). Art as activism and education: Creating venues for student involvement and social justice education utilizing Augusto Boal's theater of the oppressed. *The Vermont Connection*, 31(10), 82–95. <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol31/iss1/10>
- Seligsohn, A., & Grove, M. (2017). The essential role of campus planning in student civic education. In E. C. Matto, A. R. M. McCartney, E. A. Bennion, & D. Simpson (Eds.), *Teaching civic engagement across the disciplines* (pp. 47–53). American Political Science Association.
- Shapiro, J., & Hunt, L. (2003). All the world's a stage: The use of theatrical performance in medical education. *Medical Education*, 37(10), 922–927. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2923.2003.01634.x>
- Thomas, N., & Brower, M. (2017). Politics 365: Fostering campus climates for student political learning and engagement. In E. C. Matto, A. R. M. McCartney, E. A. Bennion, & D. Simpson (Eds.), *Teaching civic engagement across the disciplines* (pp. 361–374). American Political Science Association.
- Wedig, T. (2010). Getting the most from classroom simulations: Strategies for maximizing learning outcomes. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 43(3), 547–555.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909651000079X>
- Weinstein, J. R. (2004). Neutrality, pluralism, and education: civic education as learning about the other. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 23, 235–263.
<https://doi.org/10.1023/B:SPED.0000028333.81199.8e>

Author



Margot Morgan is assistant professor of political science at Indiana University Southeast, where she serves as the campus coordinator for the American Democracy Project (ADP). In 2021 she was awarded ADP's annual John Saltmarsh Award for her commitment to civic engagement. She is the author of *Politics and Theatre in Twentieth-Century Europe: Imagination and Resistance*.